

Freedom of British India through the Lens of the Khaskar Movement

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**Abbreviated version presented at New York Conference on Asian Studies
(October 26-27, 2007)**

This article examines the role of Allama Mashraqi and his Khaksar Movement in the freedom of British India. The topic has thus far been largely ignored by historians in India and Pakistan and therefore offers a fresh lens with which to analyze the liberation of the Indian nation from British rule in 1947. Credit for freedom has thus far been primarily attributed to the All-India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress, who had been engaged in the negotiations for partition with the British Government. I argue, however, that – more so than the political negotiations - the true foundation for freedom was made possible by the continued resistance of Allama Mashraqi and his Khaksar Tehreek (along with other political parties and pressure groups).

Inayatullah Khan, or Allama Mashraqi (Scholar of the East) as he was more commonly known, was educated at Christ's College, University of Cambridge. He started his career in 1913 as Vice Principal of Islamia College in Peshawar.

In 1930, Mashraqi founded his Khaksar Movement (Khaksar Tehreek) to free the people of the Indian subcontinent from the clutches of foreign yoke and convert his nation into a ruling power.

Mashraqi devoted many years mobilizing people and spreading the Khaksar Tehreek, inculcating in his followers a commitment to strict discipline, community service, devotion to the

cause, and love for all. Mashraqi's aim and objectives appealed to the Indians and under his leadership, the Movement quickly gained momentum.

By the late 1930s, the Tehreek was at its peak, with millions of followers and supporters all across India. It had also established branches in foreign countries. Indeed the highly disciplined Khaksar Tehreek had become the most powerful organization in British India. *Pakistan Times*, a daily newspaper from Lahore, wrote on August 25, 1963, "...the [Khaksar] movement developed into a formidable force within five years. By 1938, it had assumed explosive dimensions...Once it looked that the entire field of Muslim politics was in the grip of this movement."

Following the Khaksars' example, many other volunteer organizations began to emerge. The increasing strength of the volunteer organizations in India is evidenced by a note on the "Volunteer Movement in India." The report mentioned that the volunteer movements in India were *growing in numbers and strength*.

The British truly came to realize the strength of the Khaksar Movement in 1939. In this year, the Khaksars challenged the Government of United Provinces' authority for failing to control the ongoing Shia-Sunni riots in Lucknow. Mashraqi then went to Lucknow himself and settled the issue (though anti-Khaksar elements denied this). This was an embarrassment for the Government and they perceived it to be an intervention into their affairs. The Government arrested Mashraqi on September 01, 1939, but released him the next day.

Soon after Mashraqi's departure from Lucknow, the Congress Ministry announced that he had been released from jail after rendering an apology. Upon hearing of the false proclamation that he had rendered any sort of apology to the Government, Mashraqi returned to U.P. in order to prove that he had not issued an apology. He was once again arrested (on

September 13, 1939 at Malihabad near Lucknow), thus triggering the Khaksar-Congress Ministry conflict that eventually resulted in the resignation of the ministry. This is obvious from the Governor of U.P.'s secret letter to the Viceroy of India dated November 08, 1939.

Mashraqi and the Khaksars' interference in forcibly stopping the Shia-Sunni riots and bringing down the ministry greatly enhanced their prestige among the public. It sent a signal to the masses that the authority of the British Government could be challenged. As a result, enrollment in the Khaksar Tehreek jumped. Mashraqi underscored the increasing strength of the Khaksar Tehreek by announcing that they would be enrolling 2.5 million more Khaksars by June, 1940. This created further alarm in Government and anti-Khaksar circles.

Sensing the threat that the Tehreek posed to their rule, the Government of Punjab (under the patronage of the Government of British India) cracked down on Mashraqi and the Khaksars. The Punjab Premier and member of the Working Committee of the All-India Muslim League, Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan, imposed a ban on Khaksar activities in early 1940; the Khaksars considered this to be unjust and decided to oppose it.

On March 19, 1940, a contingent of 313 Khaksars held a parade in Lahore. Police arrived at the scene to stop the Khaksars and opened fire on them. They killed or injured many of the Khaksars, whose only defense against the barrage of police bullets was their spades. In his book entitled *Friends and Foes*, K.L. Gauba (Member Punjab Legislative Assembly) writes, "According to eye witnesses the dead [Khaksars] were more than 200." The figures that the Punjab Government actually announced weren't even close to what Gauba mentions.

In the days following the March 19th massacre, the Punjab Government continued arresting Khaksars and confiscating Khaksar materials in various cities throughout Punjab. Within a few weeks, almost two thousand Khaksars had been arrested.

The police arrests did not deter the Khaksar resistance and they continued with their daily demonstrations. Many Khaksars from other Provinces, particularly NWFP, arrived in Punjab to join the demonstrations. The purpose of the demonstrations was to secure Mashraqi and the Khaksars' release and to obtain the removal of the ban on the Khaksar Tehreek. The demonstrations were also meant to simultaneously send a clear message to the nation to rise for freedom and to the Government that the Khaksars would not rest until British rule in India came to an end.

Understanding the Khaksar aims, the Government of British India supported the Punjab Government's prompt actions. The Punjab Government also sought help from other Provincial Governments in an attempt to crush the Tehreek. Numerous secret telegrams and letters were briskly exchanged between Governors, the Viceroy of India, and the Secretary of State in England. Intelligence agencies were alerted and they became highly active. The entire British Government was shaken by the Khaksar confrontation and the Government aggressively sought to eliminate the Khaksar Tehreek.

On May 26, 1940, the Viceroy of India held a conference with Governors, the Commander-in-Chief and other top British officials to formulate actions and take immediate steps to control the Khaksar threat. Already in the midst of World War II, the Government knew that it wouldn't be able to fight on another front. It was concluded that the central government should urgently consider the following:

1. Instructing all provinces to arrest local Khaksar leaders
2. Arresting six or seven professors at the Aligarh University for promoting the Khaksar cause
3. Directing United Provinces to watch Khaksar entry into Punjab
4. Ensuring a close and effective liaison between provincial intelligence agencies

On September 02, 1940, as a result of the Khaksars' ongoing demonstrations, the ban on the Tehreek was removed and *some* Khaksars were released. However, the Government refused to release Mashraqi and many other Khaksars, including those sentenced to life imprisonment. Desperate efforts - including protests, Khaksar fasts, and the observance of "Mashraqi Day" (on May 2, 1941) – further strengthened the pressure on the Government for Mashraqi's release. The Khaksars took every possible measure to liberate their beloved leader; when his release didn't come through, they decided to undertake a massive resistance - from the North West Frontier Province to Bengal. Intelligence agencies, which were monitoring Khaksar moves closely, informed the Government of British India of the Khaksars' plan. This time (on June 05, 1941), the Central Government banned the Khaksar Tehreek in the entire India.

To counter public reaction following the ban, on June 05, 1941, the Secretary of State for India sent a telegram from London to the Home Department in India. In the telegram, he proposed to urgently secure public statements in support of the ban from prominent Muslims. Despite the Government's best efforts to the contrary, the Khaksars were determined to keep the Tehreek and its objectives alive. The efforts for the release of Mashraqi continued, but the Government refused to free Mashraqi and other convicted Khaksars. On October 16, 1941, Mashraqi, who had been kept in prison without a trial, began a penitential fast in protest of the Government's actions against the Khaksar Tehreek.

On December 05, 1941, the Government communicated to Mashraqi to disband the Khaksar Movement or he would not be released. Mashraqi wrote back, "Khaksar Movement was not my property that I could do with it whatever I liked, nor can it be discontinued."

Indeed it seemed that no amount of Government pressure could stop the Khaksar Movement. Mashraqi brought the Government to a point where they could no longer keep him

confined and were forced to release him. However, his movements remained restricted to the Madras Presidency.

Mashraqi finally emerged from solitary confinement on January 19, 1941 (after fasting in protest for 80 days).

Following his release, Mashraqi renewed his political activities. In March of 1942, Sir Stafford Cripps arrived in British India (Cripps' Mission) with constitutional proposals. However, Mashraqi wanted no proposals from the British other than to quit India. On March 23, 1942, Mashraqi sent a telegram to Cripps stating, "...I now join the Muslim League, the Congress and the Mahasabha in most emphatically demanding *complete* independence of India." Thus, on April 03, 1942, Mashraqi formally rejected Cripps' proposals. The All-India Muslim League and Indian National Congress later did the same.

Mashraqi, who had always advocated Muslim-Hindu unity, was encouraged by the other parties' refusal of Cripps' offer. He sent a telegram (on April 11, 1942), to Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Presidents of the Indian National Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, stating, "Your rejection of the Cripps proposals is the happiest augury to a united and peaceful India. Accept heartiest congratulations. I fully undertake the responsibility of securing by negotiation complete independence for India from the British Government within six months, provided the Congress, the League and the Mahasabha unitedly demand independence now, and of also non-communally organising for the safety of civil population everywhere. I offer immediately half a million Khaksars for service, irrespective of caste or creed...Do not miss this critical opportunity."

Meanwhile, efforts to obtain the removal of the ban on Mashraqi's movements continued; the ban was finally removed on December 28, 1942. Arriving in Lahore, Mashraqi made a

speech at Badshahi Mosque on January 08, 1943. He appealed to the Muslims and Hindus to unite, and to not fall prey to the forces that were dividing them for vested reasons.

Soon after the restrictions on Mashraqi's movements were lifted, Khaksar activities to mobilize the people for freedom increased tremendously. The Khaksars also held camps and mock wars, which were witnessed by thousands. The explosion of Khaksar activity did not go unnoticed, however. On July 05, 1943, the Viceroy wrote a letter to the Secretary of State for India, stating that he was not pleased with the Khaksar situation and that they must be dealt with. He also expressed his concern regarding the possibility that the All-India Muslim League might take on a more belligerent policy toward the Government in the future as well. He further stated that the Muslim League might find a "powerful instrument, such as the Khaksars...ready to its hand," in which case the Government will face "a most dangerous position." He stressed that this was a "real danger" and should be monitored closely.

Prior to the Viceroy's letter (of July 1943), Mashraqi had already been warned to stop the Khaksar activities. On July 19, 1943, he received another warning from the Government of India to stop the Khaksar camps, drills, and other activities. Nevertheless, the Khaksars continued their activities, with the exception of performing drills and wearing uniforms.

On September 12, 1943, the Home Department again wrote to Mashraqi, stressing that "no camps of any kind and for any purpose whatever shall be held." The communication added that if the Khaksar violations continued, the Government may take action without further warning. On September, 29, 1943, Mashraqi responded that he could not accept the Government's request and would not go any further in suspending military-style activities.

In spite of the Government's warnings, Mashraqi remained committed to the cause and continued his efforts to obtain freedom for India. He again tried to unite the Muslims, Hindus

and other non-Muslims in order to overthrow British rule. His efforts to unite the Indians were reported in the media and are also evident from correspondence he exchanged with Quaid-e-Azam, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and other prominent leaders. He made rigorous and continued efforts for a Jinnah-Gandhi meeting (which took place on September 09, 1944). He urged them to attain unity and shed their political differences. Unfortunately, Muslim and Hindu leaders failed to realize the importance of unity - for which Mashraqi pleaded with “folded hands” in his letters to Quaid-e-Azam and Mahatma Gandhi. Ultimately, the leaders would never resolve their differences, as anti-unification forces always jumped in to jeopardize Mashraqi’s efforts.

In 1945, Mashraqi made another effort to bring unity and freedom to the Indians and prevent the partition of India: he framed *The Constitution of Free India 1946 A.C.* (also known as the *Khaksar Constitution*). Mashraqi felt that dividing India would have many serious repercussions. In order to achieve unity and satisfaction for all communities, the *Khaksar Constitution* provided for the protection of rights for all: Muslims, Hindus, Parsees, Christians, Jews, scheduled castes, etc. However, these efforts on the part of Mashraqi to unite the Indians were again thwarted by elements that wished to prevent the harmony and solidarity of the Indians. Thus, the Indian leaders remained divided.

On May 22, 1946, Mashraqi issued a press statement emphasizing that the Khaksars would continue to fight for the nation and made an unconditional offer of Khaksars to Quaid-e-Azam:

“...If Mr. Jinnah agrees I shall throw the whole force into the matter unstintedly and every Khaksar will be ready to lay down his life for the cause of the country.”

On June 06, 1946, Mashraqi again offered Khaksar services to Jinnah, stating:

“The Khaksars are prepared to sacrifice blood and undergo any amount of hardship provided Mr. Jinnah is earnest about his mission...”

Mashraqi’s words reflect his and the Khaksars’ complete and utter devotion to the cause of independence.

In June of 1946, Mashraqi called the Azad Hind Fauj Conference at Khaksar *Idara-i-Aliya* (the Khaksar Tehreek’s headquarters) in Lahore. The conference was another attempt to convey to the British that the Khaksars were determined to end British rule.

In the meantime, the Muslim League, instead of joining forces with the Khaksars to demand freedom, rather joined the interim Government.

The marriage between the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress did not last long, however, and a political crisis soon emerged.

Meanwhile, Mashraqi was losing patience with the worthless negotiations and drawing room politics. To him, negotiations would not bring any tangible results, let alone freedom. Mashraqi realized he had no choice left, but to opt for a revolt. Although it had not yet been publicly announced, hectic efforts to this end had been underway for quite some time. Furthermore, Mashraqi knew that in order to set the stage for a rebellion, he first had to ensure the unity of the Hindus and Muslims. On December 05, 1946, Mashraqi stated:

“London talks may fail and civil war is being openly predicted. If not restricted or averted it may prove not only the doom of India’s freedom but also India’s doom. I, therefore, order every Khaksar in India...to stand up alert from the moment this order reaches him and gird up his loins to stop this slaughter even at the cost of his life. I want every man, woman and child, old or young, Hindu or

Muslim or non-Muslim...to come forward, and stop this wholesale slaughter by offering his life and force of his character... Muslim and Hindu Khaksars should march side by side with their belchas and should proclaim that they have worked for sixteen years together and stand as monuments of Hindu-Muslim unity.”

Mashraqi's call to action was heeded by the Khaksars. They began daily parades with belchas in many cities in India.

Although open rebellion had not yet been declared, the mobilization of Khaksars in the Indian army and Mashraqi's meetings with Major General S.D. Khan (of the Indian National Army) and Col. Ihsan Qadir in 1946 clearly illustrate that preparations were well underway by this point. In response, the Government attempted to take desperate preventative measures by arresting Khaksars, but the momentum of the freedom movement had now become far too great. With the threat of a revolt at hand, the British finally came to realize that time had run out on their days of rule in India. The stage was now set for the transfer of power to the Indians.

On February 20, 1947, the British Prime Minister, Lord Clement Attlee, announced that the British Government intended to transfer power to the Indians no later than June of 1948. While it seemed that freedom was now within reach, Mashraqi also realized that this transfer of power implied the division of India into three parts. Thus, in March of 1947, he made one last attempt to keep India undivided: forcible takeover. Mashraqi ordered 300,000 Khaksars to assemble in Delhi by June 30, 1947. Meanwhile, on June 03, 1947, Lord Mountbatten (Viceroy of India) announced his plan for the partition of India. Mashraqi rejected the plan immediately. The Khaksars also protested at the Muslim League session on June 09, 1947, urging the League not to accept the truncated Pakistan.

The Government took every step to prevent the assembly of 300,000 Khaksars in Delhi, including arresting Mashraqi on June 11, 1947. Despite the Government's stringent measures, 70,000 to 80,000 Khaksars still managed to gather in Delhi, as was reported in the Press.

By this time, the All-India Muslim League and Congress had already accepted the Mountbatten Plan. Thus, Mashraqi's last effort to prevent the division of India (or at least obtain a bigger Pakistan) was not allowed to materialize. Mashraqi disbanded his Khaksar Movement on July 04, 1947.

As time passed, it became evident that no amount of resistance could now prevent the division of India. Thus two countries, India and Pakistan, emerged in the midst of a bloody partition in August, 1947.

In closing, the Khaksar Movement's activities kept the masses focused on independence. Furthermore, their efforts never went unnoticed by authorities all the way up to the Secretary of State for India in London. Historical documents are witness to the fact that the Khaksar resistance against the British was one of the 20th century's longest and toughest battles. History also shows that resistance and freedom are solemnly bound; there cannot be freedom without resistance. Those who think that India obtained its freedom solely on the basis of a constitutional fight are ignoring the fact that behind this was a major struggle orchestrated by the Khaksars. Indeed, through resistance and sheer determination, Mashraqi and the Khaksars had effectively shaken the pillars of colonial rule in British India.

It is clear then that Allama Mashraqi was instrumental in gaining India's independence from Britain.